Storms spark travel mayhem across Europe

PARIS: Gale-force winds and storms barrelled through northern Europe on Friday, causing travel mayhem, shutting schools, cutting power to hundreds of thousands in freezing temperatures and leading to the cancellation of two Bundesliga matches.

Some 50 flights were cancelled in London's Heathrow airport, affecting thousands of passengers, with air travel disrupted across Europe from the Czech Republic to Moscow, where over 300 flights were cancelled at four airports serving the Russian capital.

Forecasters from Britain to Germany urged people to stay indoors as they issued weather warnings, including the rare, highest-level red wind alert for the British Isles of Scilly and Cornwall in southwestern England.

All trains were cancelled in Cornwall on Friday.

Some 57,000 homes in the UK remained without electricity, according to the National Grid energy provider, after Storm Goretti brought strong winds and heavy snow to parts of the country overnight.

More than 250 schools remained closed across Scotland, which has struggled through bad weather for much of the first week back after the Christmas break.

Over 300,000 homes without power

In France, Goretti cut power to some 320,000 homes, most of them in the northern Normandy region, the Enedis power provider said.

Overnight, gusts of up to 216 kilometres per hour (134 miles per hour) were registered in France's northwestern Manche region, authorities said.

The winds felled trees with at least one crashing on residential buildings in France's Seine-Maritime region, without injuries, authorities said.

Gusts of up to 160 kph lashed England and Wales with the Met Office forecasting agency warning of "very large waves" bringing "dangerous conditions to coastal areas".—AFP

AN aircraft takes off from the Berlin Brandenburg Airport after a storm lashed Germany.—Reuters

Tehran points finger at US

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Abdanan, Sarableh, Lomar, Isfahan, Fuladshahr, Najafabad, Yazd, Ahvaz, Dezful, Izeh, Abadan, Khorramshahr, Behbahan, Shahr-e Kord, Lordegan, Farsan, Shiraz, Marvdasht, Fasa, Neyriz, Bushehr, Bandar Abbas, Qeshm, Zahedan, Chabahar, and Iranshahr.

On ground, huge crowds of protesters poured into the streets of Tehran on Thursday night following a direct call for nationwide protests issued by Pahlavi. The chant, "Pahlavi will return," was a consistent feature in these disturbances.

While *BBC Verify* reports focused on the response of security forces, they also identified video clips documenting clear instances of aggression by rioters targeting law enforcement.

In the holy city of Qom, footage showed officers on motorbikes being ambushed and pelted with rocks by a small group of agitators.

In another highly disturbing clip, a security officer was set ablaze by a demonstrator using an improvised flamethrower after forces intervened to detain an individual. The footage cuts off before the officer's fate is known, as other officers pursued the assailant.

In Azna, a city in the west, rioters reportedly started a fire outside a police station. This act of arson occurred after security forces had responded to gunfire from protesters earlier in the day. The BBC's Persian service has claimed at least three demonstrators were killed in Azna.

The US-based Human Rights Activist News Agency (HRANA) reported that at least 34 protesters and four security personnel have died, with 2,200 arrested.

'External threats'

Khamenei in his address vowed that the nation would stand firm against external and internal threats.

"A united Iranian people will defeat all enemies. The Islamic Republic came to power through the blood of hundreds of thousands of noble human beings. The Islamic Republic will not back down in the face of those who are looking to destroy us."

Khamenei directly responded to Trump's provocations. "I urgently call on Trump to focus on the problems of his own country," the supreme leader said.

Highlighting destructive nature of the riots, Tehran Mayor Alireza Zakani reported significant damage to the capital's infrastructure.

Mr Zakani said rioters have targeted 26 banks, two hospitals, 25 mosques, police facilities and 48 fire trucks.

Israel has maintained a cautious public posture, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reportedly instructing his cabinet to refrain from commenting so as not to give the Iranian government a pretext to rally domestic support against a foreign enemy.

However, Netanyahu has previously expressed solidarity with what he termed "the struggle of the Iranian people."

Separately, Pakistan's Foreign Office spokesperson said Islamabad firmly opposed any foreign interference in the domestic affairs of other countries, including Iran, in its first public comments since a fresh wave of protests erupted across the Islamic republic. He said Pakistan viewed the situation in Iran as an internal matter and rejected external pressure or aggression.

The spokesperson stressed that Pakistan did not wish to comment on Iran's internal developments.

Flights and internet

At least 17 flights between Dubai and Iranian cities including Tehran, Shiraz and Mashhad scheduled for Friday and operated by flydubai have been cancelled, the Dubai Airports website showed.

The website did not provide a reason for the cancellations, but a countrywide internet blackout was reported in Iran on Thursday and extended into Friday as authorities moved to curb expanding protests.—Monitoring Desk / Agencies

EU states ignore French opposition to back trade accord with S. America

BRUSSELS: European Union states gave the go-ahead on Friday for the bloc to sign its largest free trade accord with the South American group Mercosur, despite opposition from farmers in France and some other countries. The approval came more than 25 years after talks began,

With US President Donald Trump shaking up global trade, the European Commission and countries such as Germany and Spain argue the deal will help offset business lost from US import tariffs, and reduce reliance on China by securing access to critical minerals.

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva hailed the EU's clearance as a "historic day for multilateralism".

"In an international scenario of growing protectionism and unilateralism, the agreement is a signal in favour of international trade as a driver of economic growth, with benefits for both blocs," he posted on X.

Opponents led by France, the European Union's largest agricultural producer, say the agreement will jack up imports of cheap food products, including beef, poultry and sugar, undercutting domestic farmers.

Farmers march, bloch highways

Farmers have launched protests across the EU, blocking highways in France and Belgium and marching in Poland on Friday.

France voted against the deal, but a sufficient majority of EU members backed the accord.

An EU diplomat and Poland's agriculture minister said that 21 countries supported the agreement, with Austria, France, Hungary, Ireland and Poland against and Belgium abstaining.

A minimum of 15 countries representing 65 per cent of the bloc's total population was required for approval.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz hailed the vote as a "milestone" and said the deal would be good for Germany and for Europe.

"But 25 years of negotiations is too long. It's vital that the next free trade agreements are concluded swiftly," he said in a statement. The approval clears the way for Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to sign the agreement with Mercosur partners - Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay - in Asuncion. Argentina's foreign ministry said the signing ceremony would take place on Jan 17.

The European Parliament will also need to approve the accord, finally concluded a year ago, before it can enter into force.

Battle is not over

The free trade agreement is set to be the European Union's biggest in terms of tariff reduction, removing 4 billion euros ($4.66 billion) of duties on its exports. The Mercosur countries have high tariffs, such as 35pc on car parts, 28pc on dairy products and 27pc on wines.

The EU and Mercosur will hope to expand evenly split goods trade worth 111 billion euros in 2024. EU exports are dominated by machinery, chemicals and transport equipment, and Mercosur's are focused on agricultural products, minerals, pulp and paper. To win over deal sceptics, the European Commission has put in place safeguards that can suspend imports of sensitive farm produce. It has strengthened import controls, notably regarding pesticide residues, established a crisis fund, accelerated support for farmers, and has pledged to cut import duties on fertilisers.

The concessions were not enough to convince Poland or France, but Italy shifted from a 'no' in December to a 'yes' on Friday, swinging the overall balance.

"It seems to me the balance that has been found is sustainable," Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni told a press conference. —Reuters

PM backs use of digital wallets

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SIM cards would be provided to eligible beneficiaries. He added that from March 2026 onward, assistance payments would be distributed digitally through these SIMs.

Solarisation of feeders

He directed that loss-making electricity feeders be shifted to solar power with the cooperation of local communities and provincial governments to ensure uninterrupted electricity supply in remote areas of the country.

The prime minister said the initiative would help reduce financial losses of deficit-running feeders besides providing continuous and affordable electricity to those regions.

He directed immediate launching of pilot projects on high-loss feeders of Peshawar Electric Supply Company (Pesco) and Quetta Electric Supply Company (Qesco).

He emphasised that consultation with elected representatives and active community participation would be ensured to guarantee the success and sustainability of the pilot projects. The meeting was informed that transitioning of loss-making feeders to solar power would create environmentally friendly, low-cost, and sustainable power generation.

The project will be implemented through a partnership involving local communities, provincial governments, and the federal government.

The meeting was attended by Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb, Information Minister Attaullah Tarar, Minister for Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety Syed Imran Ahmed Shah, Minister for National Food Security Rana Tanveer Hussain, Minister for Information Technology Shaza Fatima Khawaja, Prime Minister's Special Assistant Haroon Akhtar, besides the heads of National Database and Registration Authority (Nadra), Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, and other senior officials.—APP

Turkiye looks to join Pak-Saudi defence pact

Continued from Page 1

defence industry, according to Nihat Ali Ozcan, a strategist with Ankara-based think tank TEPAV.

"As the US prioritises its own interests and that of Israel in the region, changing dynamics and fallout from regional conflicts are prompting countries to develop new mechanisms to identify friends and foes," Ozcan said.

The Turkish Defence Ministry declined to comment, while Pakistan's Information Ministry didn't respond to a request for a comment. Saudi Arabian authorities weren't immediately available to respond to a request for comment.

New era

Should Turkiye ink its membership in the alliance, it would underscore the new era in its relations with Saudi Arabia as well. After turning the page on years of rancor, the countries are working to develop economic and defence cooperation. They held their first-ever naval meeting in Ankara this week, according to the Turkish defence ministry.

While they also share long-standing concern over Iran, they prefer engagement with Tehran rather than force. The Turks and Saudis also back a stable Syria and statehood for Palestinians.

Turkiye and Pakistan, meanwhile, have long enjoyed close military relations. Ankara is building corvette warships for the Pakistan Navy and has upgraded dozens of its F-16s.

Turkiye is already sharing drone technology with both countries, and now wants them to join its Kaan fifth-generation fighter jet programme, *Bloomberg* earlier reported.

US to pick which oil firms can invest in Venezuela: Trump

In a social media post, the president said he scrapped a second wave of strikes on Venezuela due to 'cooperation' from the country.

WASHINGTON: President Trump said on Friday that Washington will decide which oil companies are allowed to invest in Venezuela, underscoring his hands-on approach to reopening the country's beleaguered oil sector.

Trump made the remarks after he met the heads of major oil companies. He said the world's biggest producers have pledged $100 billion to revive Venezuela's oil sector.

"We're going to discuss how these great American companies can help rapidly rebuild Venezuela's dilapidated oil industry and bring millions of barrels of oil production to benefit the United States, the people of Venezuela and the entire world," Trump said to open the meeting.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Energy Secretary Chris Wright attended the meeting along with representatives of Chevron, Exxon, Conoco Phillips, Continental, Halliburton, HKN, Valero, Marathon, Shell, Trafigura, Vitol Americas, Repsol, Eni, Aspect Holdings, Tallgrass, Raisa Energy and Hilcorp.

Trump said the government would decide which companies would operate in the South American country, and guarantee their "total security". In a Truth Social post, Trump said "at least 100 billion dollars will be invested by BIG OIL".

The Trump administration has repeatedly said it is running Venezuela, with Wright asserting that Washington will control the country's oil industry "indefinitely".

Venezuelan interim President Delcy Rodriguez, who was Maduro's deputy, has said her government remains in charge, with the state-run oil firm saying only that it was in negotiations with the United States.

In his social media post, Trump said he cancelled a second wave of strikes on Venezuela due to "cooperation" from the country. Chevron is the only US company that currently has a licence to operate in Venezuela.

ExxonMobil and ConocoPhillips left in 2007, after refusing then-president Hugo Chavez's demand that they give up a majority stake in local operations to the government.—Agencies

AI gobbling up chips essential to gadget makers

LAS VEGAS: As devices from toys to cars get smarter at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES), gadget makers are grappling with a shortage of memory needed for them to work.

Dwindling supplies and soaring costs of Dynamic Random Access Memory (DRAM) that provides space for computers, smartphones, and game consoles to run applications or multitask was a hot topic behind the scenes at the annual gadget extravaganza in Las Vegas.

Once cheap and plentiful, DRAM — along with memory chips to simply store data — are in short supply because of the demand spikes from AI in everything from data centers to wearable devices.

Samsung Electronics on Thursday put out word that it expects sales revenue in the final quarter of last year to surge to 93 trillion Korean won as prices of memory chips surge along with demand.

US-based Micron Technology, which makes advanced semiconductor memory and storage products, reported record revenue of $13.6 billion in its last fiscal quarter, compared with $8.7 billion in the same period a year earlier.

The revenue surge is fueld by an unprecedented memory chip shortage which, according to market tracker IDC, could persist well into next year.

The reason for the shortfall cited by experts is that DRAM and memory chip makers have shifted manufacturing capacity to cater to AI data centers.

Meanwhile, AI features being added to all kinds of products have increased the need for DRAM and memory in devices from laptops to smart rings.

"An AI infrastructure boom has now rippled outward," IDC analysts said in a blog post.

"For consumers and enterprises alike, this signals the end of an era of cheap, abundant memory and storage." Costs of computers, drives and memory cards have already risen for consumers, according to Other World Computing founder and chief Larry O'Connor.

Sniff not bark

Gadget makers are adapting to the shortage by either paying premiums for DRAM and memory, redesigning their products, or foregoing some features, according to Michal Siwinski of Arteris, which specializes in providing connectivity inside chips.

"Maybe the (robotic) dog you'll get will sniff around and roll over, but it's not going to bark a serenade because it doesn't have enough memory," Siwinski said.

The shortage is already forcing efficiencies such as engineers writing tighter code to use less memory, according to O'Connor. "These aren't bad things; they should have already happened," O'Connor said.

"The industry has been built around cheap software that has become very bloated over the last 20 years." —AFP

Putin sends warning to West by using hypersonic missile: analyst

LONDON: Russia's launch of an Oreshnik hypersonic missile appears aimed at intimidating Ukraine and sending a signal of its military might to Europe and the United States at a crucial juncture in talks to end the war.

President Putin has repeatedly boasted of the speed and destructive power of the Oreshnik, which Russia first fired at Ukraine in Nov 2024. Since then, it has kept the weapon in reserve.

The overnight Oreshnik strike in western Ukraine came after a week of setbacks for Russia. On Saturday, President Donald Trump sent special forces to capture Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, a close Putin ally, and on Wednesday US forces seized a Russian-flagged oil tanker in the north Atlantic.

On Tuesday, Britain and France announced plans to deploy troops in Ukraine in the event of a ceasefire, prompting Moscow to respond that it would view foreign soldiers as legitimate combat targets.

Gerhard Mangott, a Russia specialist at the University of Innsbruck in Austria, said Moscow was frustrated at being sidelined during weeks of diplomacy between the US, Ukraine and the Europeans, and "particularly mad" about the planned potential troop deployment by Kyiv's European allies.

The use of the a hypersonic missile should be seen in that context, he said.

"It's a signal to the United States and the Europeans about the military capabilities of the Russian army," Mangott said in an interview.

He said Moscow wanted to convey that "Russia is to be taken seriously, given its military arsenal, and that the Europeans and Trump should return to a minimum of respect for Russian position".

'Destruction is not the goal'

The Oreshnik is capable of carrying nuclear as well as conventional warheads, although there was no suggestion of any nuclear component to the latest attack.

A senior Ukrainian official said the missile struck a state enterprise in the western city of Lviv and was likely carrying inert or "dummy" warheads - as in 2024, when Russia first fired it to test the weapon in war.

"It does appear that at this point Russia is using Oreshnik for signaling purposes, so the destruction is not necessarily the goal," Pavel Podvig, director of the Russian Nuclear Forces Project, said when asked if the use of dummy warheads would diminish the capacity of Moscow's action to intimidate Ukraine and its allies.

"It's probably a general signal of resolve to escalate. My guess is that it will be read this way by the West," he said.

Swift reaction

Western reaction to the attack, around 60km from Ukraine's border with Nato member Poland, was swift. The leaders of Britain, France and Germany called it "escalatory and unacceptable". European Union foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas said it was "a clear escalation against Ukraine and meant as a warning to Europe and to the US".

Russia specialist Mangott was sceptical about the official statement from the defence ministry that the Oreshnik launch was in response to an alleged Ukraine drone strike targeting one of Putin's residences, in the northern region of Novgorod, late last month.

Ukraine has denied any such attack took place, accusing Moscow of lying about it in order to derail peace talks.

Several high-profile Russian war bloggers also criticised the official framing of the strike as a revenge attack.

One, Yuri Baranchik, suggested it would have "looked more convincing" if Moscow had fired the missile at President Volodymyr Zelensky's bunker in Kyiv.

Mick Ryan, an Australian military expert, linked the weapon's use to Russia's recent setbacks, especially over Venezuela.

He said the point was "to demonstrate that Russia remains a nuclear-armed world power. In this guise, it is a psychological weapon, an instrument of Putin's cognitive war against Ukraine and the West rather than a weapon of mass physical destruction".

Russian arch-hawk Dmitry Medvedev, a former president who is now deputy chairman of Putin's Security Council, alluded in a social media post to the capture of Maduro, the oil tanker seizure by the US and the possibility of further US sanctions against Russia, which he said had made for a "stormy" start to the year.

In comments highly critical of Washington, he said international relations had descended into a madhouse and compared the Oreshnik strike to "a life-saving injection of haloperidol", an antipsychotic drug.

Prominent Russian war blogger Fighterbomber, a former military serviceman, said he thought the use of the Oreshnik was a display of power to convey a message and that Moscow would not be resorting to it often.

He noted that some Oreshnik systems had been transferred to Belarus and that Russia would have some of its own in reserve, but suggested that there was not an endless supply of the relatively new missile.

"Taking all these constants into account, we can assume that we can afford to conduct such demonstrations two or three times a year," he wrote.

He expressed hope that no further launches would be needed for now, concluding:

"The signals have been sent and they have been heard." —Reuters